

Garamendi calls for investment in "intellectual infrastructure"

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CHICO -- While they used different words and emphasized different points, a collection of education advocates including Lt. Gov. John Garamendi had a single message: Spend more money on schools.

Tuesday, Garamendi told a small audience on the Chico State University campus that education cuts in Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's proposed budget are "starving" California's education system.

"We are starving the education system and it's not (just) this budget. This has been going on for the last two decades," said Garamendi.

He said all levels of public education, from K-12 to the University of California, have been put on a "starvation diet."

The lieutenant governor, who told his audience in the campus free speech area that he was a graduate of the California State University system, said the time has come to "invest in the intellectual infrastructure" of California.

Garamendi didn't criticize Schwarzenegger for the governor's proposed budget cuts.

He said the governor's budget plan was a "rattling of the cages, and he thankfully did rattle the cages" in the state.

The Democrat lieutenant governor summoned the ghost of Ronald Reagan, who Garamendi said faced a similar budgetary crisis during his tenure as governor.

Reagan, according to Garamendi, "reformed, made some cuts, and raised taxes" to overcome the budget shortfall.

Garamendi pointed to another Republican, Gov. Pete Wilson, who the Democrat said also made reforms, cut some programs and raised taxes during a similar situation in the early 1990s.

"Are we going to invest in our own future or are we going to turn our backs on the long history of the state of California?" asked Garamendi.

While he clearly was endorsing raising taxes as one element in dealing with the current budget crisis, he also stoutly opposed one way to raise educational revenue. Garamendi, who is also a

member of the CSU's Board of Trustees, said raising student fees was the wrong approach.

He claimed that over the last five years, student fees — which he called "student taxes" — have climbed by 100 percent.

"That is the termination of the free education system. It's got to end," he said.

"We built this state on education being a public good, not a private good. If you want a private good, go to Stanford or the University of Southern California," he concluded.

While the lieutenant governor was the big name on the stand Tuesday, he was by no means alone.

Esmeralda Campos, Chico State Associated Students director of legislative affairs, made the point that the governor's proposed budget was just that: a proposal.

She said the proposed cuts can still be fought.

Kelly Staley, superintendent of the Chico Unified School District, told the audience that an anticipated \$8.5 million shortfall in her district's budget has forced the closure of two schools, and the layoff of 60 teachers and 100 staff members, all of whom are members of the community and whose lost wages will hit hard locally.

Beyond the economic impact of the deficit, she said, "California's youth deserve more, not less."

Chico State Professor Susan Green, who is also president of the campus chapter of the California Faculty Association, the CSU's faculty union, said there is "absolutely nothing left to cut" in the university system.

She also said the anticipated cuts have forced the 23-campus system to reject 10,000 qualified candidates for admission because the system can't afford to teach them.

Green called the loss of 10,000 candidates "devastating."

Chico State Associated Students President Osazee Edebiri said the students and the public have to "hold the legislators accountable" and make it clear that if education in general, and higher education in particular, aren't protected, then those in Sacramento who don't vote for it won't be re-elected.

"We can do this. We can really do this," he said.